

The Mass In Slow Motion

Volume — 6

The Greeting by the Celebrant

The Mass In Slow Motion is a series on the Mass explaining the meaning and history of what we do each Sunday. This series of flyers is an attempt to add insight and understanding to our celebration of the Sacred Liturgy. You are also invited to learn more by attending Sunday School classes for adults which take place in the school cafeteria each Sunday from 9:45 am. to 10:45 am.

This series will follow the Mass in order.

The celebrant standing at the Chair greets the assembled people in one of the following ways:

1. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.
2. The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.
3. The Lord be with you.
4. Peace be with you. (Only Bishops may use this greeting).

In each case the people respond: “And also with you.”

As is often the case, we hear them so often we miss the point! But through his greeting the priest declares to the assembled community that the Lord is present! The greeting and the congregation’s response expresses the mystery of the gathered Church and that Christ Jesus is among us. For, as the Lord says in the Scripture, “*Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in the midst of them.* (Matt 18:20) The greeting ritual is both theological and descriptive. Something powerful and wonderful has just been told to us.

Therefore, informal additions by the clergy such as “Good Morning everyone” are not called for or helpful here. To announce to us that the Lord and his grace are both present and available to us is far better than some colloquial form of “hello,” or remarks about the weather or the progress of the local sports team. We need to grasp the significance of what is taking place to see how inappropriate such light banter is at this moment.

We are not just in any gathering, we are with the Lord and He with us, and his grace and mercy are available to us! Indeed and in fact the Lord is present and ministering to us.

The ritual (or rules for the priest, known as the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM)), does allow for the celebrant to add some introductory remarks after the greeting: *After the greeting of the people, the priest...may very briefly introduce the faithful to the Mass of the day* (GIRM # 50). Notice the purpose of such remarks is to draw the faithful more fully into the feast they are celebrating or perhaps to announce the basic theme of the readings that are about to be read, or perhaps the mystery of the Eucharist that is about to unfold. Here again light banter about extraneous matters seems out of place. Rather, that the Lord is present and he is ministering to us and unfolding for us the mystery of his Grace is the most basic tone of this moment of greeting.

History – Originally it seems the Roman rite began simply with the readings. This was probably reflective of the very small congregations, which gathered in homes or other places. There was little need for a formal greeting. However, as the Church emerged from persecution and communities became larger, and processions longer, a greeting of some kind became more of a necessity.

St. Augustine mentions in the City of God 22:8 “*Salutavi populum*” (I greeted the people) as he began Mass. Likewise, in solemn functions of the 7th century the first thing that happened when the Pope reached the Altar was a series of greetings for the co-liturgists (much as in our present day sign of peace).

But in the Middle Ages the greetings came more and more to be paired down while rites such as prayers at the foot of the altar and other introductory rites were added. In the Traditional Latin Mass, the greeting was a simple *Dominus vobiscum* (the Lord be with you) but it was not proclaimed to the congregation until after the Kyrie and Gloria and immediately before the opening prayer.



Today the greeting is restored but is still brief in nature. Further, the greetings include a richer drawing from the written greetings of Paul in the New Testament as well as the greeting by Jesus to his Apostles after his resurrection, “Peace be with you.”

In November we will begin using a new English Translation of the Mass which will change the response of the people to the greeting from “and also with you” to the more traditional, “and with your spirit.” Some have objected to going back to the more traditional format. Why is this change being made and why does it make sense?

Flawed Premise? Most of the controversy around the issue is premised on a notion that the current expression “And also with you” is a more formal equivalent of “Same to you.” As if, when the Priest says “The Lord be with you” and the congregation were to respond “Same to you, Father.” But this is not really what is being said by the congregation or what is meant by the Latin response *et cum spiritu tuo* (and with your spirit). The current translation is not only inaccurate, it is misleading since most people do think they are saying “same to you, Father.”

Well, if that isn’t what is being said, what really is being said? In effect, the expression *et cum spiritu tuo* (“and with your spirit”) is an acknowledgement by the congregation of the grace and presence of Christ, who is active and operative in the spirit or soul of the celebrant. Christ’s Spirit is present in the priest in a unique way in virtue of his ordination. The celebrant is acting “in the person of Christ;” Christ Jesus is present and active in him, working through him.

Hence what the dialogue means is:

- **Celebrant:** The Lord be with you.
- **Congregation:** We do in fact acknowledge the grace, presence and Spirit of Christ in your spirit.

This understanding of the dialogue is mentioned by one of the early Fathers of Church. St. John Chrysostom wrote:

If the Holy Spirit were not in our Bishop [referring to Bishop Flavian of Antioch] when he gave the peace to all shortly before ascending to his holy sanctuary, you would not have replied to him all together, “And with your spirit.” This is why you reply with this expression....reminding yourselves by this reply that he who is here does nothing of his own power, nor are the offered gifts the work of human nature, but it is the grace of the Spirit present and hovering over all things which prepared that mystic sacrifice. (Pentecost Homily)

So, again, the priest or bishop who celebrates Mass is configured to Christ by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Spirit of Christ is in him in a unique way that is unlike any other non-ordained member of the congregation. The priest acts *in persona Christi*. That is, Christ personally ministers through him in such a way that we say that Christ is the true priest and celebrant of every Mass. The phrase “and with your spirit” is an acknowledgment and statement of faith in this fact. The congregation says in effect, “We acknowledge the Spirit, presence and grace of Christ in your spirit father.”

This understanding of the Greeting and response is confirmed by the fact that only a Bishop, priest or deacon may give the greeting “The Lord be with you” and hence receive the response, “and with your spirit.” For example, the General Instruction for the Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest says:

The layperson is not to use words that are proper to a priest or deacon and is to omit rites that are too readily associated with the Mass, for example, greetings – especially “The Lord be with you” – and dismissals, since these might give the impression that the layperson is a sacred minister. (SCAP # 39)

To conclude, the greeting by the celebrant is no mere “hello, everybody.” It is a declaration that the Lord Jesus is in our midst, ministering to us and acting through the priest-celebrant.